

Emperor Caligula: Man, Monster, Myth

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Emperor Caligula

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Emperor Caligula

Man, Monster, Myth

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1 Seeking the true caligula

“Hence the deeds of Tiberius, though they were felt to have been very harsh, were nevertheless as far superior to those of Gaius as the deeds of Augustus were to those of his successor.”

- Cassius Dio

Gaius Julius Caesar Caligula is considered to be among the worst emperors to have held power in the Roman Empire. The stories told of his cruelty, viciousness, and depravity are extensive. No ancient historian attempts at redeeming his reputation. It would seem that the main sources concerning the life of Caligula are largely in agreement, yet certain variations in the stories and missing details have raised suspicion among modern historians as to what is truth and what was written in an attempt to depict Caligula solely as a mad, irrational fiend for political and personal biases of the early authors.

One such discrepancy comes in the details of Caligula's sexual depravities. One of the most complete ancient sources concerning Caligula comes from the biographies of Suetonius, A Roman historian who wrote “The Twelve Caesars” in the late 1st to early 2nd century A.D. Suetonius records that Caligula engaged in incest and frequently violated his three sisters. Yet, two of Caligula's contemporaries who survived him, Seneca and Philo, as well as the historian Tacitus, never mention this. Seneca and Philo are liberal with their criticisms of Caligula and his excesses, as is Tacitus, who largely despised emperors and was eager to detail all of their faults. It seems unlikely that this rumor, if true, should not have come to the ears of these three men. Instead, this report was first heard by Suetonius some years later. It is not impossible for such to be the case, but with Caligula's wild and open behavior, and other writers open dislike for him, one would expect that particular indiscretion to be widely circulated.

Also odd is the missing details of a large conspiracy against Caligula that was contrived in 39 A.D. The events have been found documented in inscriptions in ancient Roman cities. In addition, they were discussed in Cassius Dio's histories, published sometime in the late 2nd century or early 3rd century A.D. The events were highly dramatic, caused the death of many men, and aroused the suspicion of the emperor toward his close associates. Suetonius casually mentions the events surrounding the conspiracy in his later biographies of Claudius and Vespasian, showing that he was aware of them. However, he failed to give a detailed description of it in his book

dealing with Caligula himself.

Some authors have seen these omissions and conflicting accounts as evidence of intentional manipulating of the facts to depict the emperor as wholly insane and evil. The truth may not be so definite. Indeed, some modern scholars have instead argued that Caligula was a decent and rational ruler who was posthumously reimagined into a vile, perverted demon. This attitude is overcompensation for too many individual sources. Some accounts were written nearly contemporaneously and agree on the manner of his rule. If the desire to smear Caligula was due to an attempt to discredit imperial rule, those same historians should not be seen giving praise to Augustus, Claudius, and others. Nor does it make sense that they attributed such greatness of character to Caligula's father, Germanicus, and gave so much sympathy in the deaths of his family members. Sometimes in Roman histories, one wonders whether an individual emperor was reviled in order to cast the beloved predecessor in a better light. Similarly, that a successor was so disliked that the memory of his predecessor becomes gilded by comparison. In this case, neither of these explanations can be true, as Tiberius, Caligula's uncle and adopted father, is also reported to have descended into cruel and immoral behavior. The histories do not deal with him kindly.

Therefore, the most reasonable explanation is that while certain details may have been added, changed, or embellished in the portrayal of the Caligula, for him to have achieved such a universal level of hatred, the Romans must have indeed experienced appalling things under his rule. As with Tiberius, the first months of rule gave the people hope of a decent ruler. Soon, that power sent both men into madness, ruthlessness, and depravity. Whether or not Caligula was medically insane or merely the product of a childhood and young adulthood surrounded by brutality may never be known for certain, but his rule scarred the people of Rome and left a testament to the fact that few men are capable of holding such extreme power wisely and without corruption.

2 an unusual childhood

“Give us back Germanicus!”

- Chanted by Roman citizens after Caligula's father's death

The full birth name of Caligula's father is unknown. He was awarded the name Germanicus in honor of his many victories in the campaigns of Germania. That is the name by which he was known. By all accounts, Germanicus was deeply beloved by both his soldiers and the people of Rome for his exemplary physical and moral capabilities.

“He was handsome, courageous, a past-master of Greek and Latin oratory and letters, conspicuously kind-hearted, and gifted with the powerful desire and capacity for winning respect and inspiring affection. Only his legs were somewhat undeveloped, but he strengthened them by assiduous exercise on horseback after meals. He often fought and killed an enemy in hand-to-hand combat, and did not cease to plead causes in the Law Courts even when he had gained a triumph. At home or abroad, he always behaved modestly, would dispense with lictors when visiting any free or allied town, and offered sacrifices at whatever tombs of famous men he came across. On deciding to bury under one mound all the scattered remains of Varus' fallen legionaries, he led the search party himself and took the initiative in the collection.”^[1]

Germanicus was held in such high regard by the Romans that he was frequently mobbed by his supporters every time he entered and departed Rome. Upon his return from the campaigns in Germania, the Praetorian Guard disobeyed orders to march out to greet him. The guard came along with a multitude of Roman citizens. All of them were marching out twenty miles from the city to meet the beloved general. Augustus deeply respected and loved Germanicus and

wondered for some time whether he should choose to make him his successor rather than Tiberius. He eventually settled for ordering Tiberius to adopt Germanicus as his son and heir.

The emperor now called Caligula was born Gaius Julius Caesar on the 31st of August, 12 A.D., the third son born to Germanicus. His mother, Agrippina the Elder, was a granddaughter of Emperor Augustus and, according to the histories, a mentally strong and capable woman who was not prone to emotionality. When Caligula was born, his father was leading the Roman campaigns on the northern borders of the empire. Agrippina seems to have stayed behind to deliver their child. Though his birthplace was claimed to have been both Tibur and a village called Ambitarvium, near the junction of Moselle and the Rhine, Suetonius disputes both of those claims. He believes the first to have been an attempt at flattery and the second an overestimation of the importance of certain monuments. He supports the belief that Caligula was born in Antium, south of Rome. Shortly before his death in August, of 14 A.D., the Emperor Augustus wrote a letter to Caligula's mother, Agrippina the Elder, sending his farewell and telling her to "keep well on the way back to your Germanicus."^[2] At the time, Caligula would have been just under two years old.

Agrippina and her young son successfully rejoined Germanicus and his legions in Germania. The young boy became a beloved mascot of the legionnaires. His mother even made him a tiny Roman uniform. The soldiers gave him the nickname Caligula, which means "little boots," that has persisted to this day. Their affection for the little boy was so great that they were calmed from violence out of respect for him. The story is that, upon learning that Emperor Augustus had died many of the soldiers staged a mutiny. They intended to install Germanicus as the emperor by force despite his refusal to violate the line of succession that Augustus had established. In order to keep their young son safe, in the midst of the chaos, Germanicus chose to send Agrippina with Caligula to the neighboring city of Trier. When the rioting men realized why he was being taken away, they were overwhelmed with guilt and grief that their actions might threaten the little boy. They immediately stopped the uprising and even seized the carriage he was riding in, begging his parents to keep him in the city and to spare them the shame of having made it necessary for him to flee.

Germanicus managed to distract the remaining disgruntled soldiers by pushing forward into Germania and subdued the region. He returned to Rome in the year 17 A.D. and was granted a spectacular triumph,

with trophies, prisoners, pictures of the battlefields, and a chariot containing the noble commander with his five children all processing through the streets of the capitol. Only a few months later, Tiberius dispatched the general to Syria to restore order in the eastern part of the Empire. Agrippina and Caligula traveled with him. He succeeded in defeating the rebellious King of Armenia, placed a new king in power, and changed the administrative structure of Cappadocia, before being cut off in his efforts when he became severely ill in Antioch and eventually died at the age of thirty-three.

It was reported that his body was covered with dark stains with foam present around the corners of his mouth. When he was burned, his heart was left intact among the ashes, the Romans believed this to be proof of poisoning. On his deathbed, Germanicus accused Gnaeus Piso, the governor of Syria, of poisoning him. This accusation took hold. Many believed that Tiberius had engineered the death and that Piso was acting under his orders. Suspicion was heightened when neither Tiberius nor his mother mourned his death. They did not authorize a state funeral when Germanicus's ashes were returned to Rome. The people, however, were devastated by the news of his death.

“On the day when he died the populace stoned temples and upset altars; people threw their household gods into the street, and refused to acknowledge their newly born children. Even the barbarian who were fighting [the Romans], or one another, are said to have made immediate peace as though a domestic tragedy had affected the whole world; some princes shaving their own beards, and their wives heads, in token of profound grief... The renown of the dead man and the bitterness of his loss were accentuated by the horrors which followed; for everyone believed, and with good reason, that moral respect for Germanicus alone kept Tiberius from displaying the cruelty of his wicked heart – which was soon to burst forth.” [3]

Suspicions of Tiberius's involvement in Germanicus's death and indignation at his unpleasant nature were raised even higher by his cruel treatment of Germanicus's family. Caligula and his mother returned and lived in Rome together for ten years, but tension soon arose between Agrippina the Elder and Tiberius. Agrippina was vocal with her suspicions and anger regarding her husband's death. She openly supported her children's claim to the throne and denied those of Tiberius's own son. She joined with senators that opposed the rising influence of the Praetorian Guard. In 29 A.D., she and her two eldest sons, Drusus and Nero, were arrested, tried, and exiled to prison on an island off the coast of Campania.

While in prison, she was beaten, losing sight in one eye as a result and eventually went on a hunger strike. Though she was force-fed for some time, she eventually succeeded in causing her own death. Tacitus suggested a possibility that she was deliberately starved and the stories of her choosing her own suicide were manufactured to cover the act. Her two oldest sons were also eventually killed. Nero was forced to hang himself. Drusus was starved to death and at one point even ate his own bed in a desperate attempt to stay alive. Their bodies were chopped into so many pieces that it was difficult to bury them.

While his family was being tormented and killed, Caligula was under the direct supervision of his grandfather, Tiberius. He had been invited to the emperor's retreat on the island of Capri, perhaps as a guest or perhaps as a prisoner. Why Tiberius spared his youngest grandson is largely unknown. He is said to have stated at one point that he was a lonely old man. Maybe he was looking for companionship, maybe he liked the young boy, or maybe he just wished to groom an older successor to the throne—one who would hold the coveted blood of Augustus, his own son being still too young to rule alone. For whatever reason, at the age of eighteen, Caligula joined his uncle on the island.

Always having been drawn to actors and theatre, the young man took their lessons to heart and carefully showed no reactions to the death of his family and no anger toward Tiberius. He remained ever obedient and respectful to his adopted grandfather. On the island of Capri, he was likely exposed to imperial power and tyranny first hand. It has been said that Tiberius used to watch as those he condemned were thrown from the cliffs, and then beaten by sailors to ensure that they had died. He satisfied all of his sexual fantasies, having boys and girls dressed as nymphs and young boys that he called his "minnows" that would chase and pleasure him in the baths.

Despite his own cruelties and perversions, Tiberius is said to have seen some of the darkness that hung over his grandson even then. Caligula had taken to going to tortures and executions voluntarily for his own enjoyment. He ate, drank and fornicated at will. The old emperor Tiberius, "with characteristic shrewdness," "had exactly gauged the young man's vicious inclinations, and would often remark that Gaius' advent portended his own death and the ruin of everyone else. 'I am nursing a viper for the Roman people,' he once said, 'and a Phaethon for the whole world.'" [4] On another occasion, when Caligula had mocked Sulla, Tiberius responded with the prediction that Caligula

would have all of Sulla's vices and none of his virtues. "At the same moment he embraced the younger of his two grandsons [Tiberius Gemellus] with a flood of tears, and, noting the savage face of the other, said, 'You will slay this boy, and will be yourself slain by another.'"[5]

Caligula was first married to Junia Claudilla, but she died in childbirth. After this, he began to take up with Ennia Naevia, the wife of Marco, Commander of the Praetorian Guards. Suetonius claims that Caligula undertook to seduce Ennia, with promises that he would marry her if he became emperor. She, in turn, gained favor for him with her husband. Tacitus maintains, however, that Marco was the initiator of the plot. He sent Ennia to Caligula to seduce him and bring him into the conspiracy. In the end, he agreed, as long as he became emperor. He then poisoned his adoptive grandfather. Perhaps either Caligula or Marco even finished the job by smothering Tiberius with a pillow. This rumor gained greater credence when later Caligula boasted of having planned to kill Tiberius and entered the room one evening with a knife. However, he was moved to pity finding him asleep and abandoned his goal.

3 The young emperor

“Now Caius managed public affairs with great magnanimity during the first and second year of his reign, and behaved himself with such moderation, that he gained the good-will of the Romans themselves, and of his other subjects.”

- Josephus

Caligula's rise to power was met with widespread celebration. After the cruel actions of Tiberius, they were hopeful for a good and kind leader. His father's beloved reputation and the horror they had felt at the treatment of his family also endeared him to the people. Soldiers remembered him and loved him from his time at campaign with him. When he entered Rome, escorting Tiberius' body for burial, they met him joyfully, made sacrifices in his honor and gave him "such endearments as 'star,' 'chicken,' 'baby,' and 'pet.'"^[6] The Senate instantly revoked Tiberius' first will, which made his other grandson joint emperor and gave Caligula absolute power because Tiberius was not in his right mind when he had written the will. This idea proved to be correct because he put a mere boy in charge. This argument would later be substantiated as a convenient excuse, as Caligula honored the remainder of its provisions. The new emperor did, however, choose to adopt the boy as his son, thus giving some respect to the final wishes of Tiberius and securing a political advantage in the matter of succession. In the celebrations of Caligula's ascension to power, lasting at least the next three months, 160,000 animals are said to have been sacrificed in thanks to the gods.

In his first months of rule, Caligula seemed to be all that the population hoped he would be. His actions made him immensely popular with both the people and the men of power. He seemed to be a generous and magnanimous ruler. Despite the wrongs done to him and his family by Tiberius, he still honored all promises made in the will with the exception of Tiberius Gemellus's position as his co-

emperor. He published the will and paid all the bequests listed by Tiberius, including giving 1,000 sesterces to each member of the Praetorian Guard from the former emperor and adding another 1,000 himself. He gave gifts to the guards of the city and soldiers stationed further. He distributed the forty-five million sesterces left to the people and also gave them 200 each plus sixty extra as interest in repayment of the sum they should have received to celebrate Caligula's coming of age a few years earlier.

Appearing fiscally responsible, he published accounts of the public money. This was something Tiberius had refused to do since leaving Rome. He began publishing an imperial budget. He also apparently personally helped to put out a fire that started in the city and gave monetary compensation to those that suffered from it. He gave honor to those of lower rank and respect to men who were likely to become equestrians, even though they had not yet attained that rank. He also stopped certain taxes, gave many gifts to the people attending games and contests, and received praise for extending the Saturnalia celebrations to five days in place of four, declaring the fifth to be "youth day."

Caligula made himself a sympathetic figure with his honoring of the dead, giving a funeral speech in honor of Tiberius while crying throughout. Then, he immediately sailed to the prison on the island of Pandataria to retrieve the remains of his mother and brothers, despite having to travel in bad weather. He is said to have personally transferred their ashes to urns with deep reverence and brought them with great ceremony into Rome. After interring them, he called for funeral sacrifices and games to honor his mother, as well as renaming September as Germanicus, to honor his father. He gave his grandmother great honors, added his sisters' names to the oaths taken by the emperor's name and the wishes for fortune that were attached to senatorial motions. He recalled those exiled by Tiberius.

He also seemed, in the beginning, to have a respect for the democratic rule of the Senate. He refused the imperial titles usually conferred and avoided influencing the Senate. He also forbade anyone to make statues of him. He gave magistrates full authority but at the same time re-established the electoral system to put the people in charge of the choosing of the magistrates. When the Senate elected him consul, he took his uncle Claudius as his co-consul. He shared the consulship every time he held it except once. This last was not due to any nefarious power-grab, however, but rather because his co-consul died without his knowledge while he himself was away from Rome. He also completed several civic projects begun by Tiberius and expressed

interest in cutting a canal through Greece to improve the trade routes.

Caligula's initial propriety and democratic tendencies were a successful echo of Augustus himself. The careful maneuvering to hold complete power, and yet appear to be sharing it, was a skill that had made Augustus so successful in slowly morphing the Roman Republic into the Roman Empire and then ruling it well. In a consular speech to the Senate, the new emperor and consul expertly distanced himself from Tiberius. He maintained the respectful attitude of the adopted son while condemning the indiscretions and power-grabbing actions of his predecessor. He then "promised to share his power with [the Senate] and to do whatever would please them, calling himself their son and ward."^[7] The Senate, somewhat skeptical of the promise but unable to communicate this openly, decreed that his speech should be read each year, ostensibly in honor of the emperor, but also serving the purpose of continuing to remind him of the promise he had made to them.

Thus, first seven months of Caligula's reign were described as being "blissful." Most of the actions he took as a consul were to hold games and celebrations. No hints of his later cruelties manifested. In the eighth month of his rule, however, at the end of October 37 A.D., he fell horribly ill. There were speculations, as is usual when misfortune falls upon the imperial house, that he had been poisoned. Caligula's two most powerful friends, Marco and Silanus, began to make plans in the event that Caligula did not survive. The two had been largely instrumental in helping Caligula secure the throne. Now, they decided to put their support behind Tiberius Gemellus as the next emperor in the event that Caligula's illness proved fatal. Anxious for his family and his sisters to maintain power if he died, Caligula named Drusilla, his favorite sister, as his heir, meaning that power would transfer to Aemilius Lepidus, his brother-in-law, should he not survive.

4 Resorting to cruelty

“So much for the Emperor, the rest of this history must deal with the Monster.”
- Suetonius

Yet Caligula did survive and recover. Some have speculated that his illness and possible poisoning had damaged his brain and caused the changes in his behavior. Others believe that he was merely reminded of his own mortality and reminded of the many that would plot to take his life and his power should the opportunity arise. He responded with much greater ruthlessness than previously, accusing Tiberius Gemellus, his adopted son, of having plotted against him and sentencing him to die. He sent a centurion and a military tribune to ensure the death of the young man. He instructed them to force his suicide. It was unlawful for anyone to kill the heir to the throne. Gemellus had never been instructed in the use of weapons or of fighting and did not know how to kill himself, and tragically

“at first exhorted those officers who had come to him to put him to death themselves, stretching out his neck ; but when they did not dare to do so, he himself taking the sword inquired in his ignorance and want of experience what was the most mortal place, in order that by a well-directed blow he might cut short his miserable life ; and they, like instructors in misery, led him on his way, and pointed out to him the part into which he was to thrust his sword ; and he, having thus learnt his first and last lesson, became himself, miserable that he was, his own murderer under compulsion.”[\[8\]](#)

Soon after, Caligula disarmed Marco, the commander of the Praetorian Guard, with skilled diplomacy, assigning him to be prefect of Egypt. This was ostensibly a great honor but in reality, simply a means of

removing him from the imperial presence. Before he could leave, Marco, among others, was charged with crimes against the emperor. Many were either executed or forced to commit suicide. Some of these charges were fabricated entirely. Other charges were made against the accused of participating in the attacks on Germanicus's family, on the strength of evidence from documents. These were the same ones that Caligula had claimed to have permanently destroyed. Still more were accused of inappropriate behavior while Caligula was ill, perhaps seen as an indication that they were enemies of the emperor.

Silanus was removed from the Senate after Caligula subtly undermined his authority. Silanus knew that with this knowledge of Caligula's dislike for him, he would eventually be targeted by Senators eager for rewards and political gain. Therefore, he instead committed suicide and secured his family's future. Had he been tried and found guilty of criminal activity, it would have been confiscated. By his voluntary death, he ensured that his fortune would be left to his wife and children.

The first indications of Caligula's coming horrors were seen at the time just following his recovery. During his illness, the Romans were deeply distressed and made sacrifices and entreaties to the gods that he might be spared. Whether from genuine concern or an attempt to win favor, one man swore he would fight in the arena if Caligula recovered. Another declared that he would commit suicide, giving his life for his emperors, should Caligula live. Upon his recovery, Caligula made sure that both men went through with their flippant promises.

Next, he chose to take another wife. He is said to have abducted Livia Orestilla from her wedding to Gaius Piso. He justified this choice with the fact that both Romulus and Augustus had taken a woman who was already married. Livia, however, was deeply loyal to her intended husband and often would meet him without permission. Caligula feared that any child born to her would be suspect in its parentage. Within two months, he divorced her and banished both her and Gaius Piso.

Other political decisions which the young emperor made in the beginning of 38 A.D. were met with overall approval. He largely maintained the uneasy balance of imperial rule and senatorial decisions, as well as remained popular with the people. Despite this, criticism began to arise due to his extravagant lifestyle and deviant public behavior. All of the preceding emperors had been steady, experienced, older men. By contrast, Caligula took power at the age of

twenty-five. He had a young man's passion for exciting spectacles, holding frequent games and attending them all himself. He vehemently supported the team that wore "frog-green" and was known as "The Party of the Leek." He also frequented the theatre and would become so engrossed in the play that he would take sides for or against specific actors, and become so carried away that he would join in singing or reciting with the actors, imitating their gestures to either praise or critique them. The aristocratic Romans began to see him as behaving like one of the crowd. They were meant to rule. While he lorded himself above them, his actions did not uphold the dignity that they expected from a fellow aristocrat, let alone the emperor himself.

On June 10th of 38 A.D. Drusilla, Caligula's favorite sister and named heir, died unexpectedly, sending him into a spiral of grief. It may well be that he suffered a nervous breakdown which led to his later actions, or perhaps Drusilla had provided an ethical influence on the young man, and without her he allowed his worst instincts to take over. Caligula shut himself away in mourning and would see no one, eventually spending time traveling aimlessly around the countryside, neglecting his personal grooming and wallowing in his heartbreak. Drusilla was deified after her death, only the third Roman to receive that honor, sharing it with Julius Caesar and Augustus. A temple was built for her, decrees given that men were to swear in her name, and extravagant games planned for her birthday. Caligula forbid the citizens of Rome from attending the baths or holding banquets while mourning was still underway. Supposedly, a man that was selling water for mixing into wine was executed for it. The people struggled to know whether they should be mourning Drusilla or worshiping her. Caligula's response to them was wildly inconsistent, sometimes forgiving, and sometimes executing.

The uneasy Augustan balance that Caligula had maintained in the first couple of years of his reign fell apart in the first half of 39 A.D. His cruel nature manifested itself in force. The ancient sources state that Caligula had squandered the royal treasury with his extravagance in the first couple of years of his reign and that his abominable behavior increased as he sought ways to fund his lifestyle. Modern historians have suggested that there is evidence of a large conspiracy against Caligula's life that was uncovered. Many senators were put to death due to it. Those that remained were cowed and forced to submit utterly to Caligula's rule. Under this freedom, he became openly arrogant and cruel.

The known facts are that, after becoming consul again, Caligula

abdicated after only thirty days. Shortly after, many men of high rank were sentenced to execution. Even more men of lower ranks were killed in gladiatorial contests. He held trials by torture in his dining room during dinner and kept an expert headsman by his side to perform decapitations at any given time. However, his preference for executions was to inflict a large number of small wounds and cause the victim to die slowly. He would frequently tell his executioners to “make him feel that he is dying.”[9] Suetonius tells that many men of decent standing were branded by the emperor and sent to manual labor in mines, practically a death sentence in itself, put to work constructing roads, or thrown to wild animals in front of a crowd.

“Others were confined in narrow cages, where they had to crouch on all fours like animals; or were sawn in half – and not necessarily for major offences, but merely for criticizing his shows, or failing to swear by his Genius.” Gaius made parents attend their son’s executions, and when one father excused himself on the grounds of ill health, provided a litter for him. Having invited another father to dinner just after the son’s execution, he overflowed with good fellowship in an attempt to make him laugh and joke. He watched the manager of his gladiatorial and wild-beast shows being flogged with chains for several days running and had him killed only when the smell of suppurating[10] brains became insupportable. A writer of Atellan farces was burned alive in the amphitheatre, because of a line which had an amusing double entendre. One knight, on the point of being thrown to the wild beasts, shouted that he was innocent; Gaius brought him back, removed his tongue, and then ordered the sentence to be carried out.” [11]

Horried at the acts of barbarism, Caligula’s popularity with the people began to suffer. They lost enthusiasm for attending the displays of cruelty at the arenas and circuses. Caligula grew angry with them, dragging them out of their seats to be arrested when they did not show proper interest in his spectacles. At one point, frustrated, he exclaimed: “would that you had but a single neck!”[12] At the same time, Caligula became openly defiant toward the Senate, going before them and rebuking them for criticizing Tiberius, something he had once done freely himself, and undertook to prove that the Senate was responsible for each of the men that had been killed. He next brought out documents that he had sworn he had burned and read them out in front of all. He called them sycophants and hypocrites and accused them of fostering hatred for the emperor and the entire imperial system. His words caused widespread consternation and terror.

“The Senate and the people were in great fear as they recalled the denunciations that they had uttered against Tiberius and at the same time pondered over the contrast they had just heard from Gaius and his previous utterances. For the moment their alarm and dejection prevented them from saying a word or transacting any business; but on the next day they associated again and bestowed lavish praise upon Gaius [Caligula] as a most sincere and pious ruler, for they felt very grateful that they had not perished like the others.”[\[13\]](#)

5 spectacles, superfluity, and the imperial treasury

“Let them hate me, so long as they fear me.”

- Emperor Caligula

With the Senate and the people groveling before him, Caligula sank into the excesses that he craved. He devoted himself entirely to the games and the theatre. At one stage, he invited his favorite racehorse, named Incitatus, to a lavish dinner where he fed him golden barley corn on golden plates and toasted his health. The horse was given an ornate marble stable with an ivory manager, a staff of servants, and made it possible for Incitatus to receive guests to dinner, all the while robed in splendid purple, the color of the aristocracy. He eventually planned to make the horse a consul. This is often seen as evidence of Caligula's insanity or lack of reality, which may very well be the case. Modern historians have suggested that it may have been a more deliberate maneuver, intended to mock the opulence of the Senators and equestrians by placing a horse higher than them in the social structure. It is difficult to know for certain which is true, though later actions of the emperor also call his sanity into question.

Continuing his patronage of extravagant, wild spectacles, Caligula spent massive amounts of money on renovating an arena near the Saepta Julia to hold water so that it could perform an exhibition of a naval battle. He later abandoned the site and undertook the same changes to a different arena. At one point, finding butcher's meat too expensive to feed all of the wild creatures that he had procured for his games, he decided to feed them with criminals. Without paying any attention to the severity of the crimes with which they were charged, chose at random a group of prisoners and ordered them killed and fed to the beasts. When he had run out of criminals to feed them, he gave

the order “that some of the mob standing near the benches should be seized and thrown to them; and to prevent the possibility of their making an outcry or uttering any reproaches, he first caused their tongues to be cut out.”[14]

Caligula greatly enjoyed the pleasures of fine living. He invented new kinds of baths, used expensive hot and cold bath oils, and indulged in all nature of exotic dishes, including drinking pearls dissolved in vinegar and offering guests golden bread and meat. He used to scatter money from the window of his palace and the roof of the temple of Julius Caesar. He also gave orders for the building of massive, ornate, Liburian style ships with jewels embedded in their timbers, baths, promenades, beautiful mosaics banquet halls, and varieties of potted fruit trees all aboard them. In these ships, he would cruise along the coast of Campania and also journey to his many luxurious villas. One of his favorites was at the town of Baiae, a haven for wild partying and sexual pleasures. Two such massive ships of Caligula’s reign were discovered in Lake Nemi in 1929 and were on display until they were destroyed in 1944 during the Second World War. Their museum has since been restored and scaled down models of the ships built. Almost all of the original wrecks were destroyed by fire.

Sometime in 39 A.D., Caligula performed his most remarkable spectacle, the crossing of the Bay of Baiae from Puteoli to Baiae, a distance of about 2.5 miles. Gathering all available merchant ships and building others on the spot, he bridged the bay with the ships and then, in imitation of Xerxes crossing the Hellespont some 500 years earlier, he ordered the ships to be connected by planks and covered with dirt to create a continuous land bridge. Cassius Dio states that the construction was not only a bridge but also held rooms for lodging and places with potable running water along its length. On the first crossing, Caligula donned purple silk robes, precious stones and golden ornaments, a sword, a shield, a crown made of made of oak leaves, and what he claimed was the breastplate of Alexander the Great, taken from the conqueror’s tomb when the emperor had visited Alexandria. Mounting a magnificent, proud war horse, Caligula led his soldiers at a wild charge across the bridge as if pursuing an enemy. Later, he returned in the facsimile of a triumph, driving an ornate chariot with a boy named Darius, a Parthian hostage, beside him as if a prisoner of war. He was followed by the Praetorian Guard. Many friends and followers drove Gallic chariots. After this display, he stood near the center of the bridge and delivered a great speech to commemorate their “victory” over the sea, giving himself much praise for undertaking such a grand enterprise and extolling his soldiers as if

they had come through much danger and hardship. He paid them well for their labors and caused a great feast to be held. Later on, as the wine flowed, he drunkenly hurled members of his following into the sea. Some drowned, but many managed to swim to shore despite their inebriation.

Caligula's motivations for the building of the bridge are unclear. Both Suetonius and Cassius Dio suggest multiple explanations that have been put forth. One possibility was merely a desire by Caligula to top the feat of Xerxes crossing the Hellespont. He is said to have exclaimed that Neptune feared him and to have ridiculed both Xerxes and Darius for their inferior bridge. Some thought that the main purpose behind the bridge was simply an engineering spectacle to frighten the Germans and Britons, whom he intended to conquer, both by its grandeur and by recalling of Persian might in the 6th century B.C., as well as the feats of Alexander. Certain of the courtiers that were close to Caligula claimed that he had another reason, that when Tiberius had been attempting to decide whether to name the young Caligula or his cousin Tiberius Gemellus as his heir, Thrasyllus the astrologer had said "As for Gaius, he has no more chance of becoming Emperor than of riding a horse dry-shod across the Gulf of Baiae." [15]

All of these massive expenditures for ostentatious shows took their toll on the Roman treasury. Caligula looked for new ways to raise funds for his continuing luxury. The ancient historians indicate that many executions were ordered as a way to gain money since a condemned man's property and money was confiscated by the empire. Several high ranking officials were dispatched to this end or committed suicide before they could be killed. One praetor by the name of Junius Priscus was accused on charges due to the rumor that he was wealthy. After his death, when it was discovered that he had very little, Caligula is said to have stated, "He fooled me and perished needlessly when he might just as well have lived." [16] According to Cassius Dio, anyone of any substance was at risk for losing it, either by being accused of wrongdoing and killed or by more subtle means.

Caligula managed to get any bequests left to Tiberius switched into his own name. He also demanded close friendship of high ranking officials, calling them grandmother and grandfather, and thus by an unspoken threat inducing them to leave him money in their wills as well as offering him gifts while they yet lived. If any leading man had died and not willed a portion of his means to Caligula, the emperor would declare the will void and claim the whole sum. Many were distressed by this and began to claim that they had left him large

sums, whether it was true or not. Even this attempt at placation often backfired, as Caligula was known to get impatient if they had not yet died and to send those individuals poisoned sweets and delicacies. He required the payments of large sums to secure Roman citizenship from anyone whose father was not a citizen, despite being presented with certificates of citizenship that had been issued by Julius Caesar and Augustus.

On another occasion, Caligula set up an auction of gladiators and sold them at massively overpriced figures to praetors, consuls, and other men of means. Some of these purchasers willingly offered for the arena combatants, but many were forced against their will into buying. Caligula himself sat on the auctioneer's platform and continuously raised the bids. At one such auction, a bidder named Aponius Saturninus fell asleep during the proceedings. Caligula ordered the auctioneer to take every sleepy bob of his head as a raised bid. By the end of the auction, the man had unknowingly purchased thirteen gladiators for 90,000 gold pieces and was utterly ruined. Some sources indicate that he committed suicide. Others who did not actually wish to buy the gladiator would do so out of direct threats from the emperor, from a desire to curry favor with him, or in some cases just to diminish their own fortunes and thus make themselves less of a target for execution. After selling the slaves at overinflated prices, Caligula ordered the most notable of them to be poisoned before they could be delivered to their new owners.

New taxes were soon levied to increase the imperial income, many of a wild nature. He announced his new regulations only by word of mouth, finding more reasons to prosecute as the people unknowingly violated the tax laws. Finally, after having been exhorted to publish the information, he eventually posted them. However, he wrote it extremely small and placed it where it was difficult to read. Under his new tax regime, all goods and services received some kind of tax, including food, money coming from lawsuits, legal transactions, and various salable items.

"Porters had to hand over an eighth part of their day's earnings and prostitutes their standard fee for a single sexual act – even if they had quitted their profession and were respectably married; pimps and ex-pimps also became liable to this public tax, and even marriage was not exempt." Finding prostitution so financially rewarding, he pursued it as another stream of revenue, "setting aside a suite of Palace rooms, he decorated them worthily, opened a brothel, stocked it with married women and free-born boys, and then sent his pages around the

squares and public halls, inviting all men, of whatever age, to come and enjoy themselves. Those who appeared were lent money at interest, and clerks openly wrote down their names under the heading ‘Contributors to the Imperial Revenue.’[\[17\]](#)

6 sham campaigns and rising arrogance

“But the madness and frenzy to which he gave way were so preposterous, and so utterly insane, that he went even beyond the demigods, and mounted up to and invaded the veneration and worship paid to those who are looked upon as greater than they, as the supreme deities of the world, Mercury, and Apollo, and Mars.”

- Philo of Alexandria

In the year 39 A.D., Caligula embarked on his only imperial campaign north into Gaul. The ancient sources claim that this was another attempt to collect revenue for the depleted imperial treasury. More modern historians wonder if some political advantage was not being pursued. It does seem contradictory that Caligula would set out in search of money, yet employ reportedly between 200,000 and 250,000 soldiers, considering the expense that would entail. He also continued to give lavish games and spectacles as he moved northward.

Yet in other matters, he did indeed continue in actions that seem designed for monetary gain. He took spoils of war from all, whether of substance or not, despite fighting no actual battles. He also received gifts, whether voluntary or coerced and sentenced those of some means to death, ostensibly due to rebellious intentions or conspiracy. He also realized that he could take in large sums of money by selling items of his that were brought from the palace. So successful was this venture that he sent back to Rome for a number of valuable items and heirlooms to be sold. Once he discovered that a man had bribed those that issue invitations for him with 2,000 gold pieces in order to receive a summons to dinner with the emperor. Rather than be indignant, Caligula was thrilled. The next day he ordered that the man pay 2,000 gold pieces for a trifling object at auction but also issued

him a personal invitation to dine with him.

While still north of Rome, it was suggested to the emperor that he should seek German recruits for his bodyguard. So, he immediately ordered a march further north into Germania, setting off at such a great pace that the men could hardly keep up with him. He soon grew tired and rode in a litter for the remainder of the way. He demanded that the inhabitants of each town that he approached sweep their streets and water them down for the dust. His one accomplishment on the campaign was to receive the surrender of Adminius, the banished son of the King of Britain. He treated the surrender as if he had conquered Britain, and sent dispatches to Rome that hinted at the same.

Finally, while in Gesoriacum on the coast, he staged his famous sham invasion of Britain. He lined his troops up on the shoreline and positioned his units as if he intended battle. He then marched them into the sea and ordered them to gather sea-shells, calling them “Plunder from the ocean, due to the capitol and to the Palace.”[\[18\]](#) He commemorated the victory by ordering the construction of a lighthouse, modeled on the one in Pharos, to provide light to the ships, and gave a reward of four gold pieces to each soldier as if he was being exceedingly generous.

In expectation of a grand triumph when he returned to Rome, Caligula began to gather his “spoils of war” for display. He found tall local Gauls and ordered them to grow their hair, dye it red, and learn German that they might pose as his conquered German prisoners. The ships were carried overland back to Rome. He sent a letter to his compatriots ordering that a triumph be prepared that was more lavish and spectacular than any hitherto known. He required them to be as frugal as possible but also told them that the property and wealth of everyone were theirs to use as they saw fit.

In the end, Caligula’s departure from the army was rather ignominious. He desired to massacre large legions of soldiers, those who had mutinied at the death of Augustus when he was a small child. His friends desperately convinced him not to do so, but he insisted on performing a decimation, the execution of every tenth man. He ordered that they parade without weapons before him. Many legionnaires began to suspect his motives and quietly slipped away to retrieve their weapons. Noticing this, Caligula fled in fear and hurriedly made for Rome.

Following his return, Caligula's arrogance was unprecedented. He dressed himself as gods, both male and female, impersonating Jupiter, Neptune, Hercules, Bacchus, Apollo, Juno, Diana, and Venus. He claimed to have had intercourse with the moon. He demanded that the senators and men of rank greet him by kissing his hand or even his foot. He spared those who groveled before him as if he were holy. He demanded that the heads of statues be removed and replaced with his and eventually claimed to be the brother of Jupiter.

One specific story survives in several sources. After marrying, divorcing, and remarrying a number of times, Caligula eventually took a woman named Milonia Caesonia into his bed. She was apparently not young or beautiful but had previously carried children, thus proving herself capable of giving him an heir. Caligula was attracted to her wild extravagance and sexual promiscuity, at times asking her to parade naked in front of his friends. He eventually came to be devoted to her, though she was not yet his wife. He would take her with him when he went riding, dressing her in a helmet, and cloak and shield. He would boast to her of the executions he had ordered carried out in a day's work.

Yet he did not marry her until she was eight months pregnant with his child. He then announced the marriage and the coming child simultaneously and claimed that the pregnancy had only lasted one month, as a result of his own supernatural powers and the strength of his virility. Caesonia bore him a healthy daughter, named Julia Drusilla and Caligula "carried her into the capitol and put her upon the knees of the statue, and said that the child was common to him and Jupiter, and determined that she had two fathers, but which of the fathers was greatest he left undetermined."[\[19\]](#) He then carried her around to the temples of all of the goddesses, before he finally laid her in the lap of the statue of Minerva, and asked the goddess to oversee the growth and education of his little daughter. Suetonius tells that Caligula was confident that he was the father to the small girl due to her violent and unpredictable temper "while still an infant she would try to scratch her little playmates' faces and eyes."[\[20\]](#)

7 even gods may bleed

“Thus Gaius, after doing in three years, nine months, and twenty-eight days all that has been related, learned by actual experience that he was not a god.”

- Cassius Dio

Living as he did, it is not surprising that Caligula was the target of several conspiracies, including the final one that eventually ended his life. Shortly before that, however, another conspiracy was discovered which helped create the climate for the coming successful murder. Anicius Cerealis and his son, Sextus Papinius, were arrested on suspicion of this conspiracy and viciously tortured. When the father would not speak a word as to the others involved in the plot, Caligula took aside Papinius and promised to spare his life and allow him to go free without further harm. The young man gave in and denounced a number of other men. Cassius Dio raised the question as to whether those men truly were involved in the plot or whether Papinius was coached on whom he should name, rivals that Caligula already desired to have put to death, but the truth of that is unlikely to ever be known for certain. When he had the names, Caligula immediately executed Cerealis and the others, forcing Papinius to watch the entire gruesome scene. Among those to be killed was Betilinius Bassus.

“When he had ordered Betilinius Bassus to be slain, he compelled Capito, the man’s father, to be present at his son’s execution, though Capito was not guilty of any crime and had received no court summons. When the father inquired if he would permit him to close his eyes, Gaius ordered him to be slain too. Then Capito, finding his life in danger, pretended to have been one of the conspirators and promised to disclose the names of all the rest; and he named the

companions of Gaius and those who abetted his licentiousness and cruelty. Indeed, he would have brought many to destruction, had he not gone on to accuse the prefects and Callistus and Caesonia, and so aroused distrust. He was accordingly put to death, but this deed paved the way for Gaius' own destruction.”[21]

For, though Capito betrayed his hand, he still sowed seeds of suspicion in Caligula's mind. He became distrustful and wary of his closest confidants. The emperor went further and attempted to turn them against one another by pretending that each was his closest ally and friend. Learning what he was doing, they were hurt by his behavior and drew away from him. Thus he lost his truest allies, and those men most likely to defend him from his ever-increasing enemies.

Similar behavior eventually fostered a conspiracy that was primarily spearheaded by Cassius Chaerea and Cornelius Sabinus, two tribunes in the Praetorian Guard. The two had been accused of being involved in an earlier plot against the emperor. Though they were innocent, they were publically shamed and threatened. Privately Caligula attempted to manipulate them against one another. Instead, all he did was create hatred in them. They, along with many others, possibly even Callistus the freedman, the once close confidant of Caligula, plotted to end his life. Josephus tells of a deeper resentment between Chaerea and Caligula. Chaerea had long been an army commander, but he was of a kind disposition and objected to Caligula's cruelties. He had incurred the dislike of the emperor by sparing men meant to be killed and delaying the collection of taxes out of pity for those struggling to survive. In retaliation, Caligula took to humiliating the man, calling him a sloth and a woman, and giving him feminine passwords to be used for identification in the night watches. Finally, Caligula forced him to torture a beautiful woman named Quintilia in an attempt to convict her lover. This final act pushed Chaerea over the edge. He approached many other men of good character who abhorred the misery they had been forced to mete out on their fellow citizens.

These conspirators resolved to fall upon Caligula without delay, but they were slowed in their attempts by the series of games underway in the city and failed to find a good opportunity. Finally, as the games drew toward their conclusion, one of the men whom Caligula believed to be a friend but was already a member of the conspiracy, convinced the emperor to leave the arena early to take a bath before dinner. The men fell upon him in an alleyway. Chaerea struck first.

“Gaius was staggered with the pain that the blow gave him; for the stroke of the sword falling in the middle, between the shoulder and neck, was hindered by the first bone of the breast from proceeding any further. Nor did he either cry out, (in such astonishment was he,) nor did he call out for any of his friends; whether it were that he had no confidence in them, or that his mind was otherwise disordered, but he groaned under the pain he endured, and presently went forward and fled; when Cornelius Sabinus, who was already prepared in his mind so to do, thrust him down upon his knee, where many of them stood round about him, and struck him with their swords; and they cried out, and encouraged one another all at once to strike him again.”[22]

Even after he had fallen, the members of the conspiracy could not contain their fear, anger, and hatred but stabbed his dead body savagely. A rumor even spread that some of them had eaten some of his flesh. His wife and child were killed soon after, putting an end to his line and once again plunging the empire into questions of succession. The members of the conspiracy joined with the senators, prefects, praetorians, and consuls to debate what should be done next. The senators wished to reinstate the democracy of the Roman Republic. However, the soldiers and praetorians concluded that such a great kingdom could no longer be ruled democratically and needed an emperor. They, therefore, went swiftly to protect Claudius, Caligula’s uncle, as the best successor to the throne, a blood relative to Augustus himself. Having heard that Caligula and his family had been killed and thinking himself next, Claudius was terrified and hid behind the curtains of a balcony door. “A Guardsman, wandering vaguely through the palace, noticed a pair of feet beneath the curtain, pulled their owner out for identification and recognized him. Claudius dropped to the floor and clasped the soldier’s knees but found himself acclaimed emperor.”[23] They carried him to their camp. Many citizens, seeing him being escorted by soldiers, pitied him, thinking that he was an innocent man on his way to his execution. However, the soldiers protected him, and with the might of their military power, installed him as the next emperor of Rome.

Caligula’s line of succession ended in his death, as did any vestiges of reputation that remained to him. In the days immediately following his death, statues of him were ripped down, his body only half-burned on a pyre and buried in a shallow grave, and his death celebrated. The ancient sources are unanimously disparaging of the young emperor. The callous acts that they describe can certainly cause doubt as to the complete truth of their stories, as do the occasional contradictions

within their works. It can be easy to wonder, as many modern historians have done, whether a concentrated effort was made to discredit and destroy his memory and to attempt to justify his actions with political reasons. Yet the ancient sources also cannot be wholly set aside.

No source speaks of Caligula as completely lacking in all good qualities. Suetonius and Cassius Dio describe positive actions he took early in his rule. Josephus lists his successful construction projects, his powers of persuasion, and his excellent skill at oration, speaking pieces both written by himself and others and possessing a talent for extemporaneous speeches. All writers acknowledge the success and even bliss of his first eight months of reign and attempt to understand what could have led to the changes in his behavior. Suetonius acknowledges that Caligula was ill, both mentally and physically, and discusses other possible reasons for his horrifying actions.

“In his boyhood, he suffered from epilepsy; and although in his youth he was not lacking in endurance, there were times when he could hardly walk, stand, think, or hold up his head, owing to sudden faintness. He was well aware that he had mental trouble, and sometimes proposed taking a leave of absence to clear his brain; Caesonia is reputed to have given him an aphrodisiac, which drove him mad. Insomnia was his worst torment. Three hours a night of fitful sleep were all that he ever got, and even then terrifying visions would haunt him. He tired of lying awake the greater part of the night, and would alternatively sit up in bed and wander through the long colonnades, calling out from time to time for daylight and longing for it to come.”[\[24\]](#)

Other sources speculate that his illness eight months into his reign caused brain damage or that he suffered a nervous breakdown because of the death of his beloved sister, Drusilla. Certainly, his childhood was anything but typical, being raised first in a legionnaire camp in Germania, watching brutal and bloody conflicts, and later to watch his whole family poisoned, starved, beaten, and horribly killed. Were the ancient sources single-minded in a quest to cover up a decent leader and portray him as a monster, it is difficult to justify why they would have included these sympathetic details, or why they would attempt to understand what it was that caused Caligula’s cruel tendencies and wild arrogance.

In addition, the same sources have no great respect for Tiberius, and describe him as a dirty, lecherous, old man who enjoyed cruelty

himself, and yet Caligula reached new depths of evil. Certainly, his rule of only three years prior to his assassination suggests that compelling reasons existed to risk a conspiracy against him, and not only the final successful one but many failed attempts before that.

While some stories and depictions of Caligula's greed and brutality may have been embellished, exaggerated, and possibly a few invented as rumors after his death, it is only logical to conclude that much of the information presented in the stories is based in truth and that Caligula committed acts so barbarous that they shocked and horrified his contemporaries, even in the midst of the common strife and violence that characterized the early years of the fledgling Roman Empire.

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